ITS Training: VLE - no distance too far - enhancing the learner journey and business processes

Summary

ITS Training has undergone a revolutionary transformation in the past two years. The company has saved money, generated more business, improved recruitment, retention and achievement and expanded throughout the world because of its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): the ‘Student Campus’. Under its previous paper-based distance learning programme it was a hard enough task to deliver lectures to students in Liverpool. Now, the company has a classroom of learners in Long Beach, California, and strong learning links with students in Germany.

About ITS Training

ITS Training provides training and qualifications to such shipping industry giants as Maersk. Based in the Suffolk port town of Felixstowe, the company provides specialised training for over 370 students from all corners of the globe. ITS Training currently provides the industry-standard equivalent for a Technical Certificate for the shipping and international trade industry: The Commercial Overseas and Shipping Training COAST course, which is accredited by the Institute of Export (IOE) and is delivered via the VLE.

The challenge

“Before the VLE, we had distance learning. There was a high drop out rate, and students would regularly miss lectures.”

The distance learning course was based around a book that was posted to students. The students would go through different units and be prompted to visit the library to research certain subjects.

“The students never wanted to visit the library, so their interest deteriorated rapidly.” John Edson
During the distance learning programme, students would have to post their assignments and exams to tutors for marking.

Because the assessment process took such a long time it was frustrating for both students and tutors.

One of the main motivations for introducing the VLE was to save time and money.

“I was tired of getting up at 4am and driving to Scotland to deliver lectures and finding out that some of the students were absent because of illness.” John Edson

There were a number of challenges monitoring the students before the VLE was introduced.

Work was sometimes lost in the post, and there was no way of tracking whether they had completed assignments.

“We first got the idea for an online learning environment in 2002.” John Edson

OCR, the examinations board, funded ITS Training to complete online assessments for NVQs. Students could go onto the database and tick their own assessment sheets.

Although it was time-consuming, the system gave John and his team their first ideas about moving the learning environment online.

**The activity**

The company started to gradually move away from paper-based distance learning five years ago. First of all they transferred the subject content onto powerpoint presentations, emailing students learning material.

From then on, it was an evolutionary process of trialling different software. They bought software from Qmark which was designed to help students assess themselves.

“Unfortunately, at that early stage, we learnt that although you can give students the correct materials, they needed to work in a more controlled environment.” John Edson

The company then realised that they would have to invest heavily to change the teaching and learning environment.
They invested in:

- New servers for the VLE;
- New telephone systems for voiceover IP;
- Increased telephone lines from 6 to 25.

They received funding from the East of England Development Agency and the LSC.

It wasn’t just the cost of the equipment that gave the company financial worries, but the time it took to program all of the software, test systems, and increase the online capacities.

“The investment was worth every penny. With the problems we were having we would have had to stop the distance learning.” John Edson

They employed an SQL developer to write the software in-house for the VLE.

“We have found that writing our own software is better than trying to modify software to how we wanted.” John Edson

Although some of the students and their employers were unsure about the VLE, they gradually acknowledged the benefits.

“People were sceptical at first so we asked students who were more in tune with IT to work with it. After a few people in the company started using the technology others seemed to follow.” John Edson

The outcomes

“The VLE has increased our business, decreased operating costs, and made the learning experience much more valuable to the tutors and students.” John Edson

The VLE has revolutionised the commercial side of ITS Training, and made it into internationally renowned training company.

“Our business base has expanded both home and abroad because of the VLE. The Mediterranean Shipping Company has just given us a huge contract to undertake their management training.” John Edson

The students have benefitted most from the VLE. They are more motivated, and are enjoying the learning experience because of the flexibility of the courses.
They can attend online lectures at home or at lunchtime in the workplace. It can fit around their lifestyles, and some students will even work on a Saturday.

If students can’t attend any of the scheduled lectures ITS can send them a copy by email so they can watch it in their own time.

“Sometimes if we schedule a lecture it’s possible there are six students from one company and they can’t all attend at the same time. If we run the same lecture 2-3 times a week they can pick and choose when they come online.” John Edson

John has learnt that students work much better in a controlled environment, and are also more motivated as the course is time-scaled through an eILP.

“Because it is a virtual classroom environment we remind learners that their colleagues will only have their papers marked when they have also sent in their work. So they receive peer pressure to get the work in on time.” John Edson

Some of the learners have given their feedback.

“Using online learning helps me as I'm able to study during my lunch hour and also able to use resources from tutors who are located in different parts of the country.” Alex Wold, Allport Ltd
“I have benefitted immensely from the VLE. Although they are 'remote' you feel like you're in the same room with all the other students and the instructor. It is also very 'green' - I save time and fuel.” Philip Wilhelm, SDV (LTD) UK

“I favour the new virtual learning session via computer / telephone. You can arrange for a high number of students to participate at the same time.” Liam Knox, Hapag Lloyd

Through the VLE, students from different parts of the industry, from all over the world, meet together for lectures. Students are building valuable relationships with international colleagues.

“The discussions are far more useful now as we’ve got students from large companies, small companies, and companies from overseas. It’s far more interactive.” John Edson

ITS has a good relationship with Duisburg College in Germany who, through the VLE, are doing an Institute of Export qualification in Germany.

German students take part in an online lecture

Employers can keep a close eye on their employees' progress. John sends students' marks to employers, and attendance is also recorded on the VLE.
“The employers find this very helpful in monitoring students’ progress. They can see their strengths and weaknesses in certain areas. If there’s a weakness we will give them extra tuition.” John Edson

“Its Training can give one-to-one tuition for those students needing extra help

Not only have students and their companies benefitted from the VLE. The tutors are more motivated.

“It’s made a tremendous difference to us, and the staff are more productive. You are not trying to justify why something hasn’t happened or if someone has failed, as it’s all recorded.”
On a more practical level the lifestyle of the tutors has improved.

“If we are observing the student we can capture them online. We don’t need to go to visit them in Liverpool at 9am in the morning.”

The VLE has also assisted in enhancing the assessment and auditing process with examination bodies.

“In regards to student observation everything is live, or can be recorded, so if the exam board want to see anything I’ve done while assessing the student they can.” John Edson

**The impact**

“When you change the method of learning you change the paradigm of the person that is learning. When people leave school with a D grade they believe that is their level. If you use a different type of learning, such as the VLE, which gets rid of their past fears, it opens many doors to them.” John Edson

In the last year the COAST programme has been a resounding success.

- The course now has a 100% retention rate;
- Before the VLE: 2 out of 10 passes;
• With the VLE: 8 out of 8 passes;
• Multiple choice test results: 87%;
• Written assignment results: 77%.

The VLE has also had an environmental impact. John has reduced his carbon footprint:

• 60,000 miles in 18 months before the VLE;
• 20,000 in the last 18 months since the VLE.

Through the VLE, students have learnt the transferrable skills they will require when either going back to work or starting an apprenticeship programme.

“Because of the VLE we have been able to interest them early. It’s applied learning, and they take all of their training and turn it into the skills they need in the workplace.” John Edson

The VLE has certainly added more value to teaching and learning as the tutors are always alongside the students.

“It makes the subjects much more interesting to teach as we teach them, but they are also able to teach us. They always find something that we may have missed.” John Edson

One student, completed an assignment on South Africa and delved deeper to find out about corruption within the oil industry.

He contacted a fellow student in South Africa to ask for information, and gave a presentation to 10 businessmen in London.

For other educational establishments looking to implement a VLE, John has said he would implement the system carefully.

“Set both short-term and long-term objectives, do lots of research, assess your options, and speak to lots of different people.” John Edson

In the future, John has planned to modify the VLE with split screen discussions and videoconferencing in order to make the environment more interactive.
Useful links

http://www.itstraining.co.uk/

http://www.export.org.uk/

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